Political Culture and Moral Literacy:
Using Words to Create Better Workers

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Integrity is commonly conflated with basic literacy in assessments of the skills workers need. This case study of a word-based character education program in Springfield, Missouri examines how business leaders may blame a lack of skills by employees on a lack of moral literacy. The premise of this essay is that the expression of a literacy program by participating institutions will be influenced by the political culture of the region in which the institutions reside. Considering the influence of political culture on community literacy programs is important because such influence is likely to privilege certain sets of socio-political and economic values, and ways of knowing, over others.

Suppose a single mother, struggling to move from public assistance to work, enrolls in a vocational course at a community college to learn basic job skills appropriate for a job in banking. She yearns for a white-collar job. She passes the class and a basic literacy/skills test administered by a prospective employer working with the vocational program. She is hired upon completing the class and works for two months before being fired. She has been late for work three times because she must juggle getting her daughter to daycare and then getting to work using public transportation. She was three minutes late for work the third and final time (Hull 26–27).

What kind of failing is this? Glynda Hull, the scholar who worked with this single mother, contends that perhaps she "could have benefited from a workplace literacy program or from 'academic' training integrated into [the] vocational program" (27). But the challenges of her life situation argue otherwise, so to "blame the problem on illiteracy in this situation, and I believe in many others, is simply to miss the mark" (27).

What happens if this employee is blamed for moral illiteracy? She apparently has not learned certain virtues that would have helped her value her responsibilities to the employer more highly. She can read. She can write. She can perform basic tasks. But, from the employer's perspective, she cannot be trusted. An employer might believe such an employee is in need of character education to become morally literate. Robert Pattison contends that "literacy, no matter what kind, is used for power" so "men use literacy…to further their own interests" (83). Those interests may be social, political, or economic and are aimed at improving those deemed deficient.

Much research has been conducted on the history and effects of character education programs in public schools, but we know very little about the effects of similar literacy

programs applied to workers or an entire community because such programs have only recently been promoted. In Springfield, Missouri, for example, the Springfield Area Chamber of Commerce developed a word-based community-wide character education program in the late summer of 2005 in response to a "skills gap" and "skills shortage" survey. The survey results showed that 72 percent of responding business owners identified character and personal responsibility as "major skill deficiencies of job applicants" (par. 7). In response, the Springfield Chamber created its own program and mascot called "Character Ed" for the purpose of "creating a community of character" and teaching workers a set of soft skills that local employers believe are foundational to functional employment. Springfield is among the first communities in the nation to create such a program. Chamber leaders assumed, as so many have done from Greek antiquity to the present, that virtues may be identified and taught as discrete concepts in such a way that the teaching results in moral behavior. The Chamber asserts these moral concepts as skills that must be learned to succeed at a job. The effectiveness of the Springfield program in terms of labor competency is outside the scope of this essay. What concerns me, however, is something that we may determine by studying the literate behavior encouraged by the Springfield program in the context of the theory of political culture, which offers us a way to understand such programs as expressions of local political ethos in service to the goals of the political culture.

Ethics and integrity are now commonly conflated with basic literacy and other basic job skills in assessments of the skills necessary for workers to succeed. For example, among the skills listed by the U.S. Labor Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills as basic "competencies" are "self-esteem" and "integrity" (Hull 8). According to Hull, it has become commonplace to assert as fact that a lack of basic skills holds "U.S. workers accountable for our country's lagging economy and the failure of its businesses to compete at home and internationally" (4). As the Springfield case will demonstrate, business leaders may now be blaming certain behaviors on the moral failings of their employees. And the solution is thought to be the teaching of moral literacy. Hull contends that the "discourse of workplace literacy tends to underestimate and devalue human potential and to mis-characterize literacy as a curative for problems that literacy alone cannot solve" (11).

Jeffrey Grabill argues that "it is probably impossible to find or design a community literacy program outside institutions" (10). The premise of this essay is that the expression of a word-based community-wide character education program by participating institutions will be influenced by the political culture of the region in which the institutions reside. It is important to consider the influence of political culture on community literacy programs, and the institutions that support them, because such influence is likely to privilege certain sets of socio-political and economic values, and ways of knowing, over others. The character of the political culture is likely to play a formative role in the content and expression of those values and ways of knowing. While specific character education programs have been a part of primary and secondary education in America since the first settlers arrived, the idea of expanding such programs to the larger community is fairly new.

Local institutions do not play an innocent role in the formation and implementation of community literacy programs, as Grabill demonstrated. He sought to discover how "local institutions function as ideological systems that give literacy meaning." Part of what creates this meaning is the social, political, and economic power and purpose Pattison contends are the driving forces of efforts to improve literacy. Grabill asserts that institutions are "writ-

ten" and therefore "they can be rewritten" (8). But, I would add, only to a point, because an institution operates in a political culture that will partly determine how the institution may be written. A community may be defined as "a collection of people united around common goals," so "institutions are those vehicles created by the community to achieve shared purposes" (qtd. in Grabill 93). The common goals and the institutions that spring from them are, to a great extent, expressions of local political culture. Political cultures, however, are not monolithic. We may see within them clashes of social, political, and economic interests.

Language use plays a primary role in creating and maintaining a political culture through the shared expression of values.

Springfield, Missouri was among the first cities to adopt a community-wide character education program, and program administrators believe it is the first community to create its own locally-designed word-based program with broad support from local businesses, churches, news media, and schools (Spain, Personal Interview). The Chamber names 650 community partners on its website. Among the three political subcultures in the United States, Springfield, in southwest Missouri, is part of the traditionalist political subculture as described by Daniel J. Elazar in *The American Mosaic*. The balance of this essay explores the way this political subculture influences the institutions and literate practice of the Character Ed program. I conclude the essay by hypothesizing how such programs might be expressed in individualist and moralist political subcultures.

Character education, like any literacy education, is not a politically innocent endeavor and is usually associated with an institution that has particular socio-political goals (Howard 189). But we should not forget that institutions may also have economic goals aimed at furthering the interests of the institution's benefactors or members. We should ask of any sponsoring body: what are the constraints and goals of the institution, and how do these affect the subjects of the literacy program? How do these constraints constitute what ethical judgments are to be and what ought to be done in regard to them? Marvin Berkowitz and Melinda Bier define character as "sociomoral competency," the "complex set of psychological characteristics that enable an individual to act as a moral agent" (73). A report issued following the Springfield skills survey, however, defines character as an economic competency: "Character education plays a key role in quality workers. The purpose is to teach children and adults that character counts….[T]his will improve the long-term availability of a quality workforce" ("Workforce").

The theory of political culture asserts that "politics can be understood as the means by which humans impose their own order upon both space and time, which are otherwise differentiated only by natural processes or characteristics. That order is imposed, first and foremost, through human culture." Culture may be understood in this sense as a way of life "combining a totality of experience" and based on "communication …which involves sharing 'ways' of perception and understanding within a community." Political culture sets a framework for "individual and group political behavior—in terms of the political thoughts, attitudes, assumptions, and values of individuals and groups and in the range of permissible or acceptable action that flows from them." Political culture does not determine

behavior over a wide range of specific social, political, or economic issues. But the political culture does influence behavior by setting "reasonably fixed" cognitive limits and "subliminal direction…. These limits and directions are all the more effective because of their antiquity and subtlety whereby those limited are often unaware of the limitations placed upon them" (Elazar 3–4).

Language use plays a primary role in creating and maintaining a political culture through the shared expression of values. Another way to express this is: a political subculture is a kind of discourse community, i.e. "a group of people who share certain language-using practices" (Bizzell 222). That these practices are shared in a political subculture, however, does not suggest that all members are equal interlocutors. The roles that members of a political subculture play are largely constrained by a number of factors depending upon the subculture. A political subculture, then, is an amalgam of competing and cooperating discourse communities—some with more social, political, or economic power than others. The theory of political culture outlines the nature of that competition and cooperation.

The three American political subcultures are a product of history, including migration and settlement, ethnic backgrounds, natural space, and regional commerce based on natural resources and transportation. In the individualist subculture, "political participation… reflects the view that politics is just another means by which individuals improve themselves socially and economically" (Elazar 230). In the moralist subculture, political participation "is considered one of the great human activities: the search for the good society" (232). In the traditionalist subculture, political participation "is rooted in…a paternalistic and elitist conception of the commonwealth" (235). Elazar lists these characteristics of the three subcultures (230–237):

Individualist Political Subculture:

- a system of "mutual obligations rooted in personal relationships";
- a civic space in which there is "no place for amateurs to play an active role"; political participation is a means by which individuals improve themselves socially and economically;
- a conceptual metaphor of democratic order as a marketplace, a business concept of government;
- a government instituted for utilitarian purposes, mostly to encourage private initiative and widespread access to the marketplace and to keep the marketplace in proper working order;
- a lack of concern with questions of what constitutes a good society.

Moralist Political Culture:

- a political system in which politics is a public activity devoted to the advancement of the public interest; good government is measured by its promotion of the public good;
- an issue-oriented politics;
- a commitment to using communal power to intervene in private activities when necessary;
- a model of political participation in which civic affairs are a matter of public concern and a duty for all citizens and amateur participation in government is tolerated;
- an ethic in which moral obligations are more demanding than the marketplace.

Traditionalist Political Culture:

- a hierarchical society is considered part of the natural order of things;
- a government has a positive role in the community by securing the continued maintenance of the existing order;
- a government functions to confine power to elites who believe in a "right" to govern, family ties and social position are important;
- a concept of participation in which those with no government role are not expected to participate;
- a system of leadership in which powerful political actors play a conservative and custodial role.

These political subcultures exist in fairly well-defined regions of the country, although there is much overlap. The individualist subculture is scattered across the midsection of the country from the mountain West to Pennsylvania. The moralist subculture may be found in the upper Midwest, New England, Northwest, and parts of the Mountain West. The traditionalist subculture is confined for the most part to the South, from Texas to the Atlantic coast. For a map of political subcultures in the United States, see Elazar's *The American Mosaic* pages 242–243.

Springfield's Character Ed program is the product of a particular place and a particular society operating in a traditionalist political subculture. And it is the product of a particular institution with well-defined goals that fit the *ethos* of the subculture. The Character Ed program is a response to economic pressures as articulated by business owners and operates through their membership in the Chamber. The program operates with the assumption that a positive response in the community will eventually encourage workers to adopt moral behaviors conducive to economic growth and social stability.

Economic statistics demonstrate that prosperity in Springfield is confined to a small segment of the population. The U.S. Bureau of the Census in 2000 indicates that the employed civilian population of Springfield is 75,199. The majority, 54,222, work in clerical, service, maintenance, construction, transportation, sales, and other hourly-wage occupations. Springfield's hourly wages rank below the national averages in every sector—an average of 17.5 percent lower with a range from 4 to 29 percent lower—according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. The Census Bureau's latest figures indicate that 42 percent of households earn $24,999 or less. The median income for male, full-time workers is $27,778 and $20,980 for females. Household median income is $45,139 (Springfield Area Chamber of Commerce). These figures indicate a top-heavy economy in which much of the income is earned by a minority, where most workers hold low-paying jobs and must combine family incomes to work their way into the lower middle class.

The Springfield Chamber completed the report of its "skills gap" survey in the spring of 2005. Local employers were asked: "what is it that you need to be successful in your business; what type of employees are you looking for?" (Spain). The report showed that 72 percent of respondents identified character and personal responsibility as "major skill deficiencies of job applicants" (Ozark Region 7). The Chamber also asked open-ended questions about deficiencies in skills; 56 percent identified attitude and character deficiencies such as poor attitude and work ethic, poor attendance, unwillingness to work and/or learn, lack of dependability, lack of honesty, lack of loyalty, and lack of personal responsibility (Ozark

Region 8). As explained by Becky Spain, Manager of Workforce & Business Development for the Chamber, if employees don't have a good moral foundation "then we're in trouble…. Employers are looking for employees they can trust, who are honest and have integrity… who can be trusted in the workplace" (Spain). The Chamber developed the Character Ed program in response to the report and publicized its intentions in the local news media to apply it community-wide. The language of the Chamber's intentions remained focused on employers' economic goals. *The Springfield News-Leader* quoted Spain this way: "When we asked employers, 'What do you need…what type of employee do you need?' they told us what they really needed are people who have basic, core characteristics and values" (Culp 1A).

The rhetoric of crisis following from the survey matches the numerous literacy crises in the United States since the early 1800s. As Hull explains:

> Such accounts are exceedingly common: The shocking illustrations of seemingly basic, taken-for granted skills which current workers or recent graduates lack… and the frightening implication that… it is almost too late to solve this enormous problem. Notice the constant emphasis on deficits… and the causal relationship assumed between those deficits and the people's performance at work. (6)

The Springfield News-Leader led the announcement and explanation of the program on April 10, 2005 by stating: "Character cannot be defined in just one word. But 12 words may be a good start" (Culp 1A). Months before the program was to begin, the reporting by *The Springfield News-Leader*, while intending an accurate and neutral portrayal of events, demonstrated that the proposed Character Ed program had particular economic and political goals that reflected the top-down power structure that we associate with a traditionalist political subculture. Plato struggled with the question "can virtue be taught?" through his character Socrates in *Protagoras* and *Meno*, but the Chamber had no such struggle. As reported by *The Springfield News-Leader*, the "initiative's goal is to get people throughout Springfield—students in public and private schools, businesses, religious circles—talking about what it means to have good character." The focus of this civic talk would be 12 words chosen by the public in a vote conducted by the newspaper. By focusing civic discussion on 12 character words, one per month, "children in Springfield's schools will learn about the word in classrooms, business leaders will discuss the word with their employees, and ministers and rabbis will discuss the word with their congregations." A *News-Leader* editorial promoting the program used a "marinating" metaphor to describe how it will work: "company leaders can talk about the word of the month at staff meetings, emphasize it in newsletters or on paychecks stubs, [and] talk about it with their children" ("Marinate"). The top-down structure of this program did not escape public notice, but fewer than a handful of letters to the editor questioned the structure of the program or the implication that employers are naturally ethical and workers are naturally unethical. In an op-ed column, a local minister chastised the Chamber and local business leaders about these issues:

The self apparently plays little role in accountability. No connection appears to exist, and none is expressed, between what choices a worker or student can make and how power constrains and enforces those choices.

> I have not joined the cause of promoting the virtues that employers wish their employees more frequently exhibited because it seemed to me that this should be a conversation between labor and management and not a lecture from management to labor. As business owners have come up with a list of the virtues they wish their employees possessed, why not, at the same time, ask employees to compose a list of virtues they would like to see in their employers? …If we want to speak about social virtue, then we should open wide our arms to include all of society and not simply tip the scales in favor of the ones who own the scales. Justice, mercy, charity and compassion on the part of employers are likely to inspire respect, honesty, responsibility and dependability among those who labor. (Ray 6A)

Another local minister complained that the Chamber program "places the emphasis on employee responsibilities and fails to take into consideration employer responsibility" (Emge 6A). The goal of the program, according to the Chamber, is to produce good workers, defined as having character traits that avoid the deficiencies in soft skills articulated in the survey results. *The Springfield News-Leader* described the goal this way: "Officials say good character means good workers, and children who learn to be honest, trustworthy and dependable in school carry those values into the workplace later" (Culp 1A).

The Springfield News-Leader presented the public with an initial list of twenty-four character words generated by the Chamber. A vote conducted by the newspaper cut the list to twelve. The original list of twenty-four included two adjectives among the nouns. A local academic suggested to the Chamber that the final list conform to parallel structure, but the advice went unheeded: "Even after repeated advice by language professionals to make the listed traits grammatically parallel or coordinated (logically consistent by use of the same forms), the chamber has persisted in using a list that would get bad marks in an elementary school classroom" (Nelson 6A). The final list of twelve included four adjectives: respect, responsible, caring, honesty, attitude, courtesy, self-discipline, trustworthy, dependable, cooperation, integrity, and accountable.

The unparallel list, while annoying to prescriptive grammarians, provides us a first opportunity to see the influence of the traditionalist political subculture on the Springfield Chamber and its partner institutions. The public supposedly voted on twenty-four words, including two adjectives. But the list changed after the vote. Why? The goal of the program springing from the survey results provides an answer that fits what we might expect in a traditionalist political subculture: The four adjectives—responsible, dependable, accountable, and trustworthy—exactly identify the qualities from the taskforce overview that employers said they wanted in employees ("Workforce"). While the list represents character traits as a collection of eight nouns and four adjectives, flyers published by the Chamber for public use by business partners define all of the words in terms of actions, as verbals, i.e., what it is the Chamber and its members expect employees to do in regard to each character word. For example, the Chamber defines the adjective "accountable" as: "To consider the consequences of your actions, and to recognize that you are held liable for your choices" (Springfield Area n.pag.). The passive construction obscures the source of power as identified by the press and the Chamber months before the program began: parents, teachers, clergy, and employers. Choice belongs to the worker but the power to hold one accountable resides with the traditional power structure. The self apparently plays little role in accountability.

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The Chamber designed the individual flyers and made them available to community partners on the Chamber website as a .PDF. The flyers include the Character Ed mascot—a child-like cartoon character, casually dressed, hair tousled—who stands at the top of the page, hands in pockets, and a cartoon bubble stating the word of the month. Each flyer offers quotes from famous people and historic leaders regarding the word of the month. Further, homilies offer a narrative example of the word of the month. The Chamber offers the flyers as a paratactic tool of conversation—privileging an oralistic concept of literacy in which workers receive wisdom from mythic and learned sources.

The Character Ed program, then, encourages businesses to implement character education programs in the workplace using a limited number of materials provided by the Chamber and a few other partners. These materials are to be used to talk with employees about the character words and what they mean in regard to employee behavior. The Chamber's website offers easy access to such material. Of particular note is a list of scenarios posted by BDK LLP, an accounting firm based in Springfield. The scenarios demonstrate the expected hierarchy of power in a traditionalist political culture. Each of the five scenarios targets unskilled, low-skilled, clerical, and service workers for scrutiny, i.e., the employment category that makes up most of the city's workforce and whose hourly wages are well below the national averages. Only one of the five scenarios could reasonably be applied to the employees of a CPA firm. Management is assumed to be an ethical role model and victim of the unethical behavior of workers. For example, in scenario #1, entitled "The Late Employee," "car trouble" causing an employee to be late is described as an "infraction." In scenario #4, entitled "I Deserve a Raise," an employee becomes envious of her boss's wealth after attending a party at his home, at which the boss brags about his wealth. The employee resorts to stealing to get her "raise." The ungrateful employee is described as living with her husband, "comfortably in a two-bedroom apartment close to work" ("Character Education").

Such themes are further reinforced for the entire community by a series of public service announcements produced by the Chamber for local television. Like the BDK LLP scenarios, business owners are portrayed as victims of the unethical behavior of employees. In a particularly telling example, the public service announcement for the word "attitude" portrays two employees having a discussion in a men's room at their place of employment. One employee stands at the sink, the other is unseen in a nearby stall. The employee at the sink complains that he's had to work overtime twice that week and the employer has also demanded that he work the weekend—his days off. The second employee exits the stall saying, "[t]hat's the wrong attitude," and proceeds to chastise his fellow employee for not pitching in to help the employer.

We may see in the Springfield case that the features and constraints of the program so far do conform to what we can reasonably expect from a traditionalist political subculture because it was created by members of the economic and political power structure as part of an institution within that subculture. I end this essay by offering two hypotheses about what we might expect if, following Springfield's example, other communities create similar word-based programs or other community-wide literacy initiatives in moralist and individualist

political subcultures. Spain said that she has received numerous inquiries from other cities about the Springfield program.

The idea of a word-based character education program aimed at creating a better workforce fits the self-improvement *ethos* of the individualist subculture and its economic imperatives. In the individualist subculture, the democratic order is metaphorically understood as a marketplace. Springfield sits in a traditionalist corner of a state in which the traditionalist subculture blends with the individualist. What makes the program attractive to the traditionalist subculture is its potential to cohere the community under the umbrella of the traditional power structure in a way that preserves that structure. While a character education program promotes the kind of self-improvement we would expect an individualist subculture to embrace, a word-based, community-wide program might be a tough sell in a subculture in which power is shared in the marketplace. Individual businesses in such a culture might be more likely to develop their own programs specific to their own needs or sign on to a very loosely structured program offered by a trade association. The most we might expect from an individualist subculture are expressions of support for a community-wide character education program, but very little formalized action. Call it encouragement.

An excellent example coming from a region with a heavy individualist influence is the "#1 Question Campaign" in Kansas City, Missouri. The decade-old program, administered by the Partnership for Children, encourages community acceptance of a particular moral act—asking the "#1 Question" before making any business, civic, or personal decision: Is it good for the children? As the Partnership's website explains:

> The #1 Question Campaign is about decision-making. It's about considering how the decisions we make will affect the children and youth in our lives and our community. It's about getting Greater Kansas City to put the needs of its children at the top of its priority list. ("#1 Question")

The program is, for the most part, an advertising campaign to create awareness for the question without the encouragement and reinforcement of formalized participation as we see in the Springfield case. Civic and economic groups and individuals are merely encouraged to ask the question. No public show of participation is required or necessarily expected. This example suggests that community-wide character education programs implemented in individualist subcultures are likely to become feel-good civic gestures. Attempts to craft programs that hope to elicit specific participation and promote specific outcomes are likely to end in frustration.

Perhaps word-based programs may feel most comfortable to the citizens of moralist subcultures because of the public-minded *ethos* aimed at creating the "good society." Moralist subcultures tend to reflect demographics that scholars have found "conducive to social movements, economic innovations, and progressive reform." These characteristics include

> social diversity, nontraditional family structures and gender roles, the presence and acceptance of gays and lesbians, a low level of religious traditionalism, and high levels of income and education." (DeLeon 694–5)

Because political participation is a civic good in the moralist subculture, and moral obligations are more demanding than the marketplace, we might expect to see the same civic enthusiasm for community-wide character education as we see in Springfield. But the discourse of the moralist *ethos* is more likely to achieve the balance between employer and employee imagined by Roger Ray, the minister who asked why employees should not "compose a list of virtues they would like to see in their employers" (6A). Elazar, however, warns us that the moralist subculture can promote a socially conservative politics much like the traditionalist subculture because some factions view social control, and the stability it is thought to encourage, as an important foundation for a good society (233).

There are many ways to define success regarding literacy programs. And, certainly, each discourse community will understand, experience, and express success differently. We may wonder, as Plato's Socrates did in *Protagoras* and *Meno*, if character can be taught in a specific way. If we accept that it can be taught, which creating a character education program presupposes, what results may we expect in regard to the moral education of a community? Will these programs encourage and create moral citizenship? The program that Springfield created asks workers to listen to power—business and civic leaders already presumed to be ethical—and learn to be literate in, and compliant with, a set of pre-defined character words. Discussion of the words in this context is a process of learning one's relationship to power, one's transgressions toward power, and one's duty to power. The discourse and thinking resemble the paratactic literacy of oral cultures, conveying the message of power by "the simple juxtaposition of ideas; appeals to the senses and emotions; by ritualized references to authority in the form of proverbs, epithets, incantations, and other formulae" (Bizzell 240). As I have demonstrated, the program in Springfield tends to conform to one of the primary concerns of the traditionalist subculture: maintenance of the socio-political *status quo*. Before agreeing to support a character education program, or other literacy program, community partners should critically examine the expression of such programs in the context of the political subculture in order to mitigate the differences in power such programs may tend to reinforce. A better literacy program must specifically express and create a dialogic experience in which all participants are presumed equal in their common humanity.

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